

# **The President's New Freedom Initiative for People with Disabilities: The 2004 Progress Report**

## **Chapter 1. Increasing Access Through Technology**

### **Providing Access to Technology**

New technologies are providing individuals with greater access to school, work, and community life. In addition to promoting the development of new assistive and universally designed technologies, the New Freedom Initiative helps to put assistive technology into the hands of more individuals with disabilities through policies that reduce barriers associated with cost.

#### *Accomplishments*

- The President secured \$37 million in FY 2002 funding for loan programs for individuals with disabilities to purchase assistive technologies under Title III of the Assistive Technology Act of 1998. The program matches state dollars with Federal dollars to create alternative financing mechanisms, such as low interest, long-term loans. The National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research made 26 new awards in September 2003 totaling nearly \$36 million. A project to assess the performance and impact of the program was also funded.
- The President secured \$20 million in FY 2002, \$19 million in FY 2003, and \$20 million in FY 2004 to fund Rehabilitation Engineering Research Centers to promote research on assistive and universally designed technology.
- The President secured \$5 million in FY 2002, FY 2003, and FY 2004 for the Assistive Technology Development Fund to assist small businesses in the development and transfer of technologies.
- The President secured \$3 million in FY 2002, FY 2003, and FY 2004 for the Interagency Committee on Disability Research (ICDR) to improve coordination of the Federal Assistive Technology Research and Development Program. Several new agencies have been added to the ICDR.

#### *Next Steps*

- The President's FY 2005 budget includes the following:
  - \$20 million for the Rehabilitation Engineering Research Centers;
  - \$15 million for the Assistive Technology Alternative Financing Program;
  - \$5 million for the Assistive Technology Development Fund; and
  - \$3 million for the ICDR.

### **Assistive Technology Mobility Devices**

In February 2003, the President signed an Executive Memorandum establishing the Interagency Working Group on Assistive Technology Mobility Devices. The Executive Memorandum directed the Working Group to: improve coordination between programs that fund or finance

assistive technology mobility devices (i.e., wheelchairs and scooters); train vocational rehabilitation counselors, other service providers, and individuals with disabilities on strategies to maximize access to assistive technology mobility devices; and inform individuals with disabilities about opportunities to access assistive technology mobility devices.

The Working Group submitted its report to the President in August 2003. It identifies 34 specific recommendations for Federal agencies to take in response to the President's Executive Memorandum. The report also identifies major Federal programs that provide financial support to eligible individuals with disabilities and describes how individuals with disabilities can pool funding from existing resources to obtain the assistive technology they need.

### **DisabilityInfo.gov**

In August 2002, President Bush signed an Executive Memorandum requiring the creation of a cross-agency portal to make disability information easily accessible to all Americans. Fewer than sixty days later, Disabilityinfo.gov was launched. Operated by the Department of Labor, DisabilityInfo.gov streamlines access to information about Federally-sponsored employment, housing, job accommodations, transportation, income support, health care, state and regional assistance programs, technology, emergency preparedness, and other programs relevant to the daily lives of people with disabilities. DisabilityInfo.gov had more than 1.5 million visitors (more than 30 million hits) during 2003. More importantly, DisabilityInfo.gov averages over 2,000 referrals a day to partnering websites. Beginning in February 2004, DisabilityInfo.gov will be hosted on FirstGov.gov, the official one-stop portal for the United States government.

### **Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act**

Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act requires that all electronic and information technology purchased, maintained, or used by the Federal government be readily accessible to and usable by individuals with disabilities. Section 508 seeks to harness the purchasing power of the Federal government to promote greater accessibility of all electronic and information technology. President Bush strongly supports implementation of Section 508, and views compliance with Section 508 as integral to meeting the requirements of the E-Government Act which he signed into law in December 2002. The Administration has taken a number of steps to ensure compliance with Section 508, and although the law's requirements apply only to the Federal government, initiatives are also being undertaken to promote better accessibility in the private sector and throughout state and local governments.

#### *Accomplishments*

- The Department of Justice operates a web page, [www.usdoj.gov/crt/508/508home.html](http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/508/508home.html), and the General Services Administration hosts an interagency website, [www.section508.gov](http://www.section508.gov), both of which provide extensive technical assistance on Section 508. In addition, the Department of Justice and the Access Board have provided technical assistance materials for web and software developers at the Access Board's website, [www.access-board.gov](http://www.access-board.gov). These websites also serve as useful sources of information for private businesses, state and local governments, manufacturers of equipment and software, vendors, and individuals with disabilities who want to learn

about accessible technology.

- The Department of Justice has issued a new technical assistance publication on making state and local government websites accessible.
- The Department of Justice worked closely with the Office of Management and Budget, the General Services Administration, the National Security Agency, and the interagency working group on Section 508 to develop the 2003 survey of all Federal agencies regarding compliance with Section 508. Federal agencies are currently responding to this survey, which will be completed in 2004.

#### *Next Steps*

- In 2004, the Department of Justice will issue a Section 508 report containing baseline data on the accessibility of the Federal government's websites.
- The Department of Justice will prepare a new comprehensive Section 508 report on procurement information, website compliance, and general implementation issues, based on the results of the 2003 survey.
- The Department of Justice will develop a document on website accessibility for public accommodations similar to the one it produced for state and local governments.

### **Creating a Robust Assistive Technology Industry Domestically and Internationally**

Department of Commerce Secretary Donald Evans has developed an eight-point initiative to support the development of assistive technologies and to promote the U.S. assistive technology industry. The initiative is based on recommendations from a two-year survey of the assistive technology industry. The Secretary announced the initiative at a July 2003 special exhibition, featuring 31 assistive technology exhibitors, held to commemorate the 13th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The initiative seeks to speed new technologies to individuals with disabilities, expand the U.S. assistive technology industry, and boost exports of our products and services. The development of a robust U.S. assistive technology industry will lead to greater assistive technology development and advancement.

#### *Accomplishments*

- The Department of Commerce is working with the Assistive Technology Industry Association (ATIA), industry trade associations, and disability organizations to provide data analysis to increase export promotion opportunities, provide technical manufacturing guidance, and catalog trade barriers.

#### *Next Steps*

- The Department of Commerce will reach out to industry via both technical forums and roundtables to engage representatives from industry and trade associations to share manufacturing information, discuss regulatory and trade impacts, and gain a greater understanding of new methods to improve the capabilities and success of U.S. assistive technology providers.
- The Department of Commerce will facilitate measurement and private sector standards development for assistive technology devices, in coordination with standards organizations, government agencies, industry, and user groups, so that new technologies

can be faster commercialized into the marketplace.

- The Department of Commerce will work with public and private research organizations to catalog and raise awareness of sources of technical assistance, product ideas, and patented inventions that could lead to the development of new assistive technology devices or services.

## **Other Activities**

Taking their lead from the New Freedom Initiative, agencies have undertaken a variety of new projects to provide individuals with disabilities greater access to technology and greater access to information through technology. In other instances, agencies have built on already existing programs in significant and innovative ways. Following are some of the most significant agency activities that further the New Freedom Initiative's goal of promoting greater access through technology.

### *Accomplishments*

- The Department of Labor's Employment and Training Administration provided a third year of funding to four grantees who are providing innovative strategies to address the extremely high rate of unemployment and underemployment of persons with disabilities by focusing on training in the high-skill, high-demand information technology sector. More than 625 individuals with disabilities have been training with the majority entering employment at average wages of \$14.75 per hour.
- The Department of Defense Computer/Electronic Accommodations Program (CAP) is a centrally funded program that provides assistive technology to allow Department of Defense and other Federal employees with disabilities to access electronic and information technology. While this program existed prior to the announcement of the New Freedom Initiative, it has expanded significantly since then. From 2001 through 2003, the program has entered into partnerships to provide accommodations for 58 Federal agencies.
- In support of the President's E-Government initiative, CAP unveiled a revised website, at <http://www.tricare.osd.mil/cap/>, that makes it easier for customers, people with disabilities, and supervisors to locate information and resources. The site enables visitors to conduct an on-line assessment of job duties to determine accommodation solutions, and enables individuals to complete an on-line accommodation request form. The site received over 3.5 million visitors in 2003.
- In 2003, CAP released a new totally accessible CD-Rom, "Real Solutions for Real Needs," describing its services and program goals.
- CAP's proactive approach to disability management offers employers assistance in addressing the problem of increasing workers' compensation claims resulting from manual dexterity problems. In FY 2003, CAP filled 346 requests for injured workers to support their abilities to return to work quickly as outlined in the President's Management Agenda.
- The Department of Education's National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research increased by seven the number of Rehabilitation Engineering Research Centers since the announcement of the New Freedom Initiative. Rehabilitation Engineering Research Centers continue to develop assistive technologies, transfer assistive

technologies to the marketplace, and identify immediate assistive technology needs of the disability community. The Rehabilitation Engineering Research Centers represent the largest Federally-supported program responsible for advancing rehabilitation engineering research.

- Training in rehabilitation technology, including assistive technology mobility devices, is a current priority of training programs for state vocational rehabilitation agencies funded by the Department of Education's Rehabilitation Services Administration.
- The Department of Education's Rehabilitation Services Administration established and is receiving information from a workgroup tasked with improving procurement policies for assistive technology within state vocational rehabilitation agencies. Focused on procedural flexibility for state workers and choice for consumers, the workgroup will generate a list of possible improvements to the procurement process.
- The Department of Transportation's Volpe Center posted and promoted industry-tested transit website usability guidelines on a Federal Transit Administration website for the use of state and local transit agency webmasters. The guidelines include user-tested recommendations for Section 508 compliance for essential transit-specific graphical information, such as system and route maps.
- The Department of Transportation is a major source of funding and supporter of the Transportation Research Board (TRB). Transportation is often a barrier for people with impaired vision, and a significant challenge to employment. A TRB Transit Innovations Deserving Exploratory Analysis project has developed a cost-effective system that helps clarify (for all riders) the surprisingly complex process of purchasing a ticket from transit fare vending machines. This system requires few modifications to existing equipment.
- The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's research program is focused on further developing and validating a safety test procedure for electronic steering and brake controllers that are used by persons with disabilities.